

Changing Practice In Dealing With The Sec Examination Course Work Through Action Research

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Abstract:

The changes that were implemented in the course work part of the SEC examination of Home Economics in 1997 meant that teachers had to find ways of guiding students in building up a portfolio with tasks which they had to work out using different investigative techniques. Teachers were also given the responsibility of assessing and marking the students' work at the end. Dedicating time for course work in the classroom by integrating it with the rest of the programme of work, as well as teaching students how to make use of different methods of research through experiential learning was important. The need for assessment criteria which are less vague and more clear for teachers and moderators to interpret also emerged, mainly as a result of problems that were encountered during the marking and moderation process because of the different ways in which the criteria were interpreted by teachers and the moderator.

Finally, this article also presents the reader with an account of the experience of teachers who tried to be researchers in their own practice. While proving to be an enriching experience for teachers, it was also realised that the school in which the action research project was carried out lacked the structural and cultural framework within which action research projects could be carried out.

Introduction

This study deals with two current issues in education, both of which feature prominently in the National Minimum Curriculum, that is, course work and action research. On the one hand, it highlights the experiences of a secondary school teacher and her colleague while dealing with changes in the Secondary Education Certificate examination course work through action research. On the other hand, it evaluates in a critical manner the role of action research in Maltese schools as a tool to affect change.

A brief explanation of the changes that had taken place in the course work of Home Economics at the time in which this study was carried out will enable the reader to get a better understanding of the situation.

Changes in the Secondary Education Certificate examination course work

In 1993, the Secondary Education Certificate examination of course work consisted of three parts, the theoretical part, which had 50% of the marks, the practical part, which had 35% of the marks, and course work which had 15 % of the marks. At the time, in the course work component of the examination, students were expected to prepare one project in Form IV, which was very similar to the 'classic project' in which students choose a topic related to Home Economics, and carry out extensive research (often from books) about it. In Form V they were expected to carry out an investigative piece of work in which they had to use a variety of research tools in order to answer their research question. Teachers had to do the course work component only with the students who were going to sit for their Secondary Education Certificate examination, students who had the motivation to do the course work, if not for anything, in order to satisfy the requirements of the examination.

Following an agreement on course work between the government, examination bodies and the teachers' union, in 1997, further changes were implemented by the Matriculation and Secondary Education Certificate Examinations Board and by the Education Division in the Home Economics course work. The major changes were that all students in class were expected to do the course work component of the syllabus, irrelevant of whether they were sitting for the Secondary Education Certificate examination or not. Instead of presenting one project in Form IV and an investigative piece of work in Form V, students were now being expected to prepare five short tasks when in Form IV on three different topics, that is, *Child Development*, *Hospitality Services* and the *Elderly*, using a variety of investigative skills, apart from the investigative piece of work that had to be done in Form V. Teachers had to deal with these two major changes.

In my school Home Economics teachers spent a whole year trying to implement these changes to no avail! Teachers felt they failed on two levels. They failed in dealing with the changes in the format of course work itself, and on a less superficial level, teachers felt helpless in not being able to deal with the responsibilities devolved to them by the Matriculation and Secondary Education Certificate Examinations Board as assessors of the course work component.

The value of course work

The literature on course work highlights many positive features which were a motivating factor behind our efforts to try to introduce course work in the classroom.

Course work **could** be a formative way of assessing students. Formative assessment is concerned with diagnosing strengths and weaknesses and provides feedback (Fairbrother and Selkirk, 1988). An other advantage of course work is that it assesses a variety of important skills which written exams do not do. Course work is seen as being more valid in measuring different types of knowledge since it makes "what is

important measurable rather than what is measurable important” (Fairbrother and Selkirk, 1988; Brown, 1990; Newton, et.al., 1995; Mobley, et. al., 1986; Black, 1995).

It is also thought that course work reduces assessment pressure, since course work is worked out throughout the school year (Fairbrother and Selkirk, 1988). Another advantage of course work is that it can be integrated into the curriculum. It is also seen as a vehicle for improving the teaching practices of teachers because to enable students to do their course work, teachers have to adopt pedagogical styles in which there is high pupil initiative (Pollard and Triggs, 1997; Mobley, et.al., 1980).

Course work is also seen as a way to bring the school and the outside environment together. Farr and Tone (1994) suggest that portfolios could be an effective medium through which one can involve parents in their children’s education. Berrill (1998) further suggests that practical activities in which students are involved during course work help students get a better understanding of their environment and the people around them. It also gives credit to assessment given by teachers because teachers are being given the responsibility of setting tasks to students and assessing their work.

Course work is also seen as a means with which teachers could achieve differentiation. Moreover, alternative forms of assessment such as course work are considered to have a higher likelihood of being equitable than traditional tests (Gipps, 1987). As suggested by Buckle (1990), while setting tasks, a teacher could differentiate by initial selection of tasks, where the students select tasks which they believe they can handle, or by outcome, where a broad task is assigned to all students, and students all interpret it or work it out according to their abilities. Therefore, students are given more opportunity to succeed.

The context in which the action research project was carried out

The context in which the action research project was carried out had a great influence on the successes and shortcomings of this project.

First of all, it was a school where the Secondary Education Certificate examinations were given a lot of importance. This helped, because the proposal of carrying out an action research project related to these examinations was immediately accepted by the head teacher of the school.

However, it was also a school environment where bureaucracy reigned. This fact clashes with the flexibility with which teachers are required to work with in an action research framework. Lack of resources in the Home Economics department at school posed its problems as well. It took a lot of valuable energy in order to get at least the basic resources in the classroom, which were obviously needed for students to do their course work.

As in all other schools, teachers had little time to meet. To meet the other Home Economics teacher, my critical friend in this project, only one common free slot was found in the time-table. Meeting teachers of other subjects was out of question, unless it was during break time.

This element of isolation, the effects of which will be discussed in detail further on in the paper, also made it difficult for us teachers to join classes together, to walk into each other's classrooms and to help out each others' students, a practice which we tried to adopt in this action research project.

Action research and the action research cycle.

Action research presents teachers with a situation where "there is no separation of 'inquiry' and 'practice'" (Elliott, 1991:4). Teachers felt at the time that reflecting on practice and planning actions in order to deal with course work in the classroom was the way forward to improve teaching. However, one has to clarify that as argued by McNiff (1988), action research is not just good teaching, it is also "a systematic enquiry made public." Various models of action research, mainly Kemmis' (1988) model of action research were followed in this action research project.

Kemmis' model features cyclical moments of planning actions in order to start affecting the desired change or changes. Following the planning stage, there's the acting phase where the plans are executed. During and after the acting phase, there's the observation phase, in which the researcher records the effects of the executed plans and their aftermath. In this action research project, during this phase, various data were collected, such as, audio recordings of lessons, students' rough work and copies of students' finished work, a diary and field notes of what happened during the day, transcripts of interviews and conferences that were held with students. All these data were analysed and marked using Altrichter, et. al's model (1993). Then there is the reflection phase, where the researcher reflects on the actions, based upon the actions recorded. The cycle does not stop there, if it does, one gets what Kemmis and Carr (1986) refer to as arrested action research. The idea is to re-plan to get better practice, and start a new cycle.

Problems with doing action research in Malta's educational culture

Innovations in the classroom occur either as a result of changes imposed on teachers by authorities or high stakes exams, or as a result of internal conflicts that the teacher feels between his/her thinking and his/her practice (Elliott, 1991). Day (1998) refers to the latter as the conflict that teachers feel between their personal, ideological and educative selves. Even though this conflict was felt very strongly by myself, the need to produce a dissertation for my Masters degree was the main motivation behind carrying out this project using the action research approach. As argued by Johnston (1994) teachers rarely carry out action research out of their own accord for two main reasons, these being, barriers that they find usually at a personal, classroom, school and institutional level and secondly because of shortcomings in the action research process itself.

These shortcomings were all experienced in the course of this action research project at different levels, mainly at the personal, at the interactive and at the institutional level.

Conflicts at the personal level

One of the conflicts at the personal level that was experienced was the lack of acquaintance with the idea of action research. Therefore, before introducing action research in schools as suggested by the National Minimum Curriculum, teachers need to be better informed on what action research is all about.

Teachers also need to feel that they have a 'say' in the changes that occur. They might think it is not worth embarking on action research projects if they feel that what they are doing will not actually change anything in the long run.

The action research process itself may be rigid and very difficult to keep up with. As argued by Newman (1988:6) life in the classroom is life on the fast lane, "teachers and students have to run fast in order to stay in their place." Keeping up with the systematic discipline required to do action research might not be easy, therefore, support for teachers doing action research is imperative.

Conflicts at the interactive level

Conflicts at the interactive level were also encountered. When taking the role of an action researcher in class, teachers have to keep in mind that they are still considered by their students as teachers, not researchers. That could affect the collection of valuable data in the action research process. A case in point in this project was when students were asked to keep a diary so that the researcher could monitor the effects that action plans were having on them, and students refused to do it.

Lack of time was also a problem. Teachers doing action research often have to do a lot of ground work before trying out a plan. For example, in our case students had to be taught different research skills before actually starting working on the tasks, a process which took a lot of time. Moreover, a very rigid, densely packed syllabus does not help.

Problems were also met when trying to develop a 'critical friend relationship' between the researcher and the other Home Economics teachers who got involved in the action research project. This was mainly due to a lack of time when meetings could be held. The same problem was met when trying to adopt an interdisciplinary approach to teaching as part of the action research process. This lack of collaboration was a lot the result of isolation and not the result of apathy from the other teachers' part. Hutchinson and Whitehouse (1986) argue that it is this element of isolation that ensures that teachers rarely have time for discussions, which in turn ensures the maintenance of administrative control and finally makes sure that the status quo remains unchallenged.

Another factor which hindered the development of the 'critical friend relationship' was the resistance that teachers have to criticism, also a symptom of isolation. Resisting criticism means resisting change and therefore improvement, thus ensuring the status quo is maintained. (Hutchinson and Whitehouse, 1986).

Maintaining a good rapport with administrators is crucial while doing action research. Newman (1998:4) suggests that "incremental reform required support from

administration. Without such support, such change is doomed from the outset". Unfortunately, a few difficulties were experienced in this area as well. The action research project brought about with it the need for resources which administrators were not always ready or able to provide. This lack of resources weighed heavily on the type of action plans that had to, or that could be planned.

Conflicts at the institutional level

On an institutional level, the action researcher has to work against the odds as well. As argued by Hutchinson and Whitehouse (1986), educational institutions are "hierarchically structured with formal asymmetrical relations of power and responsibility." On the other hand, action research encourages teachers to foster collegiality, informality, openness and collaboration. There is a great difference between what teachers in schools as they are right now are, and can be, and what action research expects teachers to be.

It is also said that action research contributes to one's professional growth (Altrichter, Posch and Somekh 1993; McNiff, 1988). Bringing down the wall that existed traditionally between research and practice did help the professional growth of the teachers involved. They managed to be researchers in their own classroom, and managed to improve teaching through action research plans which were grounded in educational theory, thus developing their own theories of practice.

But there were limitations here as well. The fact that action research revolved around finding technical solutions to problems brought about by externally devised curricula limited the extent to which one could say that professional autonomy was being acquired (Elliott, 1991; Bannister, Lomax and Whitehead, 1989; Day, 1998). There was little or no opportunity for the teachers involved to participate in the decision making of these curricula.

Dealing with course work in the classroom – an account of actions taken, reflections and theories that emerged

In the initial stages of the action research project, the factors that might have hindered teachers from completing the course work component of the syllabus and examination in the previous year were identified. This was done after taking various insights from books and other teachers' experiences during the in-service training course that was held in summer.

The first action research cycle

During this first cycle various actions were planned and executed in order to affect changes.

Formal time was dedicated to course work. This was not done in the previous year and students could have been getting the idea that course work was not important. So one lesson every week was dedicated to course work. This lesson was used mainly to introduce the course work requirements to students, to teach research method skills, to

assign task titles to students, and to monitor and to give students feedback about their work.

The second problem that was identified was that students needed to be equipped with knowledge on research skills and how to use them, and this is also what was done during that year.

Reflecting on past experience, the need to provide students with a more structured framework within which to work was also identified. Therefore, a more structured framework was provided by teachers, mainly by assigning task titles to students themselves and setting deadlines for the work to be handed in.

The final problem that had to be tackled was that of trying to integrate the work that was being done in class with course work. This was not easy at all, because students were expected to present tasks on the topics 'The Elderly', 'Hospitality services' and 'Child Development', when the core component of the syllabus was 'Food and Nutrition'.

By implementing these initial actions, some theories of practice when dealing with course work were developed.

- Dedicating formal time to course work is important.
- Equipping students with research skills is also of great help. When dealing with area secondary school students¹, who learn a lot through practice it would be better to teach one research skill at a time and then give them time to practice it out through a task.
- With students who are new to the subject, keeping control by assigning task titles yourself will help students understand better what is going on, and will give the teacher more control.
- Task titles have to be short and to the point especially when dealing with students who have reading difficulties.
- It is important to ask students to write out the aims before they embark on their work. The 'declaration' of what they intend to do is a clear indication of whether they understood what they were expected and had to do.
- Moreover, it is important to work out with students a plan of action of how they intend to work out the task. In this way, students who are away from school on a regular basis could easily identify where they have arrived in the task, and from where they have to continue when back in class.

¹ In Malta, at the end of the Primary School, students can choose to sit for an examination (which is very similar to the 11+ examination). If they pass this examination, which consists of five papers in the main areas of study, that is, English, Maltese, Maths, Social Studies and Religion, they start attending Junior Lyceums. If they fail, they would go to Area Secondary Schools, schools intended for the 'less able' students.

The second action research cycle

Even though it was felt that a lot of progress had already been done as compared to the previous year, the situation was far from satisfactory, in that the tasks students were doing were not being fully integrated with the syllabus. Mobley (1986) defines course work as the “work done by candidates during the course of their studies that is used for assessment purposes” (1986:76). The work that the students were being assigned was not integrated with the other work that was being carried out in the classroom, therefore the action research cycle progressed into trying to integrate the tasks assigned with the topics of the syllabus that we had.

There were some successful attempts in this area. Instead of doing lessons on Child development, which formed part of the syllabus, students were asked to create a photo or picture album of a child, describing his or her stage of development. By looking for pictures, finding information about the different stages of development, matching them together and presenting them in a manner that made sense satisfied both the syllabus and the task criteria.

Food and Nutrition, which was the core component of the syllabus, but which did not feature as a topic on which students could prepare a task was also integrated in the course work component. Students were assigned tasks in which they could experiment with the preparation of meals either for young children who suffer from food allergies, or elderly persons suffering from diet related disorders, all topics which form part of the Home Economics syllabus.

By the time that these two action research cycles were implemented and evaluated, the scholastic year had passed and so was the ‘formal’ action research project. However, action plans for the following year were devised, and these involved mainly

1. The training of students in doing and writing down ongoing evaluations of their course work.
2. The teaching of research skills to students who had Home Economics in earlier years. As Mobley, et.al, (1986) suggest, it is a good idea to prepare students for the GCSE (in our case, the Secondary Education Certificate) framework as from their first year of the secondary school.
3. For students who choose Home Economics in Form IV, teaching research skills through different subjects could be experimented with. This interdisciplinary approach had to be worked out with other teachers.
4. To assign to students task titles which even though focussed, as suggested by the moderator, would not make us run the risk of learning “more about the similarities among students than about ways in which they differ” (Rowntree, 1987:158). So we had the challenge of striking a balance between the two.

Other problems encountered while implementing devolved assessment policies - the marking and the moderation process

Part of the whole process of doing course work involves the marking of the course work and the moderation of the marks. Doing the marking was a very long process in which various difficulties were met.

The first problem that was met was that the assessment criteria themselves were extremely difficult to adhere to. The assessment criteria for the portfolio dealt with four major issues, which were: the extent to which the student worked independently, the good planning of work and the use of different research tools, the extent to which the conclusions drawn at the end were detailed, and the extent to which the student carried out ongoing evaluation.

A student achieving highly in the four areas in the five tasks would get between 9-10 marks, that is, the highest marks.

The problem was, that taking one task at a time, there were various instances where a student would have needed occasional help in order to start the task assignment, thus fitting in the 5-6 mark band, but then would have used the appropriate research method correctly, thus deserving 9-10 marks, but only produced a general appraisal of the work, thus deserving 0-2 marks. Taking an average of this would not have made justice to the work, but it was the fairest option available.

The situation became even more complicated when one considers that the students had 5 tasks to match to these criteria. So a student fairing highly in one task but not in an other was difficult to categorize. What looked like the fairest solution was to take an average, so if a student had two pieces of work that placed in the 9-10 mark band, an other two in the 7-8 mark range, and an other in the 5-6 range, the student was given 8 marks. On further thinking, this system proved not to be fair, in the sense that course work in itself involved a process, and more often than not, tasks done in the beginning of the year were less well articulated, and in them students needed more guidance than in those carried out later on in the year. So, if at the end of the process, students had managed to reach the 9-10 mark band, thus meet successfully all criteria, why penalize them because they did not prove to be experts from the beginning? It was felt that the spirit of formative assessment in all this was anything but present.

There were also some reservations regarding one of the criteria, mainly that in which students were expected to work in an independent manner. It was difficult to quantify how much help from the teacher's side was permitted. When it came to giving marks, this criterion was not given much weight for three simple reasons. First of all it is the duty of the teacher to help students when they are in difficulty. Secondly, if we were expecting students to be experts in the work and do it on their own, why is it called course work in the first place and why should teachers be involved in it? The third reason for helping students out with a clean conscience stemmed from the simple reason that we knew too well that the fairest guidance that could be given to the students was that which was given by the teacher, because it could be given to all students in the same way but according to their needs.

An other problem that we met at this stage was that marking the students work took a lot of time. Students kept giving in work up to the last minute, which meant that there was a lot of marking to be done at the end.

Copying was an other problem that we had to deal with since there were students who turned up with work which was copied. Since each student's work was monitored very closely throughout the year, teachers could realise which tasks were not done by the students themselves. These pieces of work were not marked for two main reasons. It was not difficult for students who wanted to copy to do so since Malta is a small country, and students could have had cousins and friends who were perhaps in other schools, who could give them the tasks they had made. Moreover, if students got the idea that teachers accepted and marked this work as if nothing had happened, the whole rationale behind course work would disintegrate. It is therefore important that only pieces of work which the teacher sees being done throughout the year, and which s/he corrects over a period of time are accepted as course work.

Another problem that we met was that some students left some of the work out. At times, this amounted to two or three of the tasks. Since in Home Economics students had to present five tasks and an investigation, leaving one task out would have meant losing just two marks (or 1% of the global examination mark). On the other hand, leaving out the course work of another subject, would have meant losing all the marks, as most subjects required students to present one piece of work. So when it came to sacrificing work because of work pressure, parts of the Home Economics course work fell victim!

Finally, problems during the moderation exercise were also met. The moderation exercise took place on the 26th of April. when it was too late for teachers and students to get feedback about the course work. Nothing could be done at that stage, even though there was a lot of improvement in the work. Teachers need more support throughout the year when dealing with changes in assessment policies, so that students would not end up penalized for the shortcomings of their teachers.

Some suggestions to facilitate the introduction and implementation of course work in the classroom

- Course work makes sense only when it can be fully integrated into the normal programme of work in class. In this action research project, this could be done up to a certain point, with a certain amount of limitations and 'cheating'². Topics related to food and nutrition, which is the core component of the Home Economics syllabus, should be one of the topics on which students could present at least one task in their portfolio.
- A lot of time is spent in class working on the tasks and the investigation. Awarding them 15% of the marks is not enough! There seems to be a discrepancy between the effort needed to get a few marks in the course work and to gain the same amount of marks in the written examination of Home Economics. Thus, the

² Teachers managed to find ways of presenting tasks related to Food and Nutrition by relating them to other areas such as *The Elderly* or *Child Development*, the latter being two topics on which students could present tasks while the former was not.

percentage of marks awarded to course work should be increased. This could be done after giving further training on the implementation of course work to teachers, and after a process of consultation with them.

- For students to present 5 tasks and one investigative piece of work was too much. It ended up a race against time. Moreover, students used to compare what they were expected to do for 15% of the marks in other subjects, and what they had to do in Home Economics for the same amount of marks. Here, there was a big discrepancy since Home Economics course work involved much more work. The amount of tasks that students have to prepare has now been reduced to three (as from May 2004 session), which is much better, especially when considering that students often use more than one research skill in each task.
- Changes that need to be implemented in the classroom should be discussed and worked out with teachers. Pilot studies of changes proposed should be done in schools before changes are implemented nation wide. It took years of teachers ending up exhausted and racing against time to realize that five tasks were too much. Who will explain to students who opted to give up trying because it was too much that now, things have changed? It is too late in the day for most of them to do anything.
- Teachers need more support and guidance throughout the whole year. Moreover, moderation should be less of an inspectorial exercise and more of a discussion.
- Changes had to be done to the assessment criteria. There is the need for the assessment criteria to be less vague, easier to quantify, and they should also be presented in a more methodical manner. Moreover, the assessment of course work should take into account the process involved, thus giving more weight to tasks carried out towards the end of the year.

How valuable was the introduction and implementation of course work in the classroom at the end of the day?

Some of the advantages of course work that were mentioned at the beginning of the paper, which were the motivating factor underlying the whole project, were in fact experienced during this action research project, while others were not! Since course work was led by us, so we could assign work according to students' abilities. However, there were limitations as to how much one could conclude that course work gave the opportunity to students who would have otherwise failed to succeed. The students who did well in the theoretical and practical aspect of the subject at school did well in the course work. Those who had difficulties in the subject usually had problems in the various areas of the subject and were the students who left parts of the course work out. Therefore, one would question the value of course work in this respect.

Course work gave us the opportunity to work with students on a more personal level, however this did not extend to having more parental involvement in many of the cases. However, course work could be said to have increased students' self confidence, and helped them develop both affectively and cognitively.

Moreover, we felt that students were given credit for showing skills which they would not have been able to show in written exams, and in which were quite good. This increased the validity of the examination that they were going to sit for. (Buckle, 1990).

Some negative aspects of the introduction and implementation of course work in the classroom deserve some comments as well.

Even though initially it was thought that course work was going to reduce assessment pressure, the opposite happened. The amount of work that the students had to do was overwhelming. Students and teachers ended up stressed out! As Rowntree (1987) argues, small doses of stress over a long period of time is still stress after all.

Another aspect that also needs to be looked into is that students in secondary schools have to do all the work in two years. We have a situation where students who need more time to learn have less of it in reality. I would therefore question the fairness of the examination to area secondary school students, since, as argued by Stobart and Gipps (1998), “fairness is questionable when the equality of educational approach does not precede the test”.

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